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Benjamin Franklin and the language sciences

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Abstract. Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), founding father of the United States and general polymath, included language among his many interests as a scientist, educator, and publisher. A particularly significant work in this area is his phonetic alphabet for English, which he proposed in 1768 for a "reformed mode of spelling". The basic principles upon which he based this alphabet are familiar to linguists, but his descriptions show a deeper understanding of the sounds of language and how they may be grouped according to articulatory principles. We report on this alphabet and his comments thereon, including his correspondence with Mary Stevenson and later with Noah Webster, and discuss other observations by Franklin on language in general, language learning, and language instruction.

Keywords. history of language science; spelling reform; orthography; Benjamin Franklin; Noah Webster; language learning

1. Introduction. On the occasion of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), along with its various "Sister Societies", including the North American Association for the History of the Language Sciences (NAAHoLS), holding its 2025 annual meeting in Philadelphia, it seems appropriate to honor the undeniably significant presence in Philadelphia of Benjamin Franklin. He is as emblematic of the city 235 years after his death in 1790 as he was during his lifetime. One need only consider the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, the "Bolt of Lightning … A Memorial to Benjamin Franklin" sculpture at the city end of the Franklin Bridge, the Benjamin Franklin Museum, the Franklin Institute (science museum and center of science education and research, since 1824), and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, to get an idea of how important a personage he is to the city's image and identity.

Inasmuch as NAAHoLS as an organization is dedicated to the promotion of "the study of the history of the many disciplines concerned with language",[1] this meeting offered a golden opportunity to connect the NAAHoLS mission with the city of Philadelphia and recognition of one of its most famous citizens, namely Benjamin Franklin himself. We thus explore here the relationship between Franklin the scientist and language in general, and more specifically the science of language.

Benjamin Franklin is well known to be a polymath and a true scientist, endowed with an innate curiosity about how the world works. While explorations of language and linguistics are not among Franklin's most famous scientific exploits, they are not negligible and have considerable interest for linguists.

2. Franklin the historical figure and scientist. It probably is not necessary for us to go into detail about Franklin's achievements here (nor do we have the time or space to do so), but a brief rehearsal helps to situate his interest in language within the scope of his overall accomplishments. He was, of course, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, but he also was an

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[1] https://naahols.wordpress.com/

implementer of foreign policy as ambassador to France. Moreover, he had a hand in the creation of various institutions that benefited society at large, including the postal service, a lending library, scholarly societies (in particular the American Philosophical Society), and the University of Pennsylvania. He also had a profound knowledge of a number of different areas and was quite the inventor, as well as a scientist extraordinaire.

Franklin's scientific activity included contributions to the study of the following objects, entities, and areas, representing just a sampling of those items listed by Van Doren (1938: 428) in his biography of Franklin:

- effect of oil on water
- electricity
- evaporation
- farming
- geology
- heat absorption by colors
- insects
- origin of American storms
- population
- salt mines
- sound
- smallpox
- tides in rivers
- whirlwinds and water spouts

Thus, as far as disciplines are concerned, his accomplishments in science range over acoustics, astronomy, botany, entomology, geology, hydrology, meteorology, physics, and no doubt many others.

Interestingly, though, for all his scientific curiosity and investigatory inclinations, he had relatively little to do with the science of language per se. This may well be a function not of any failing in Franklin himself but rather of the fact that linguistics as a science in the West was not particularly well developed in his time.[2] Nonetheless, he did attempt some important contributions in language-related matters, particularly his proposals for spelling reform detailed in §3.

3. Franklin's "A reformed mode of spelling". Franklin's most significant linguistic contribution was a schema for a modified English alphabet and "reformed mode of spelling", which originated as a short document he wrote in 1768 while in Kensington (England) and sent as part of a series of correspondences with his friend Mary "Polly" Stevenson. While this topic apparently dropped from his interests soon after, the original document, along with a letter from Stevenson to Franklin and a response from Franklin, both written in the reformed spelling schema, were published in his 1779 *Political, miscellaneous, and philosophical pieces*. This republication brought renewed attention to and interest in Franklin's proposals, and a later connection between Franklin and Noah Webster led to Webster's interest in the schema, influencing his own views on spelling reform.

3.1. FRANKLIN'S ALPHABET. Franklin begins his piece by laying out the order of his proposed alphabet, accompanied by short "remarks"; he follows this with a longer discussion of the alphabet, including a more detailed breakdown of the schema and the sounds represented.

His stated motivations for changes to the alphabet would be familiar to anyone who has introduced the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to students, with the following four major points: (i) Each letter should represent only one sound: "Thus the *g* [representing only /g/ in his schema] has no longer *two different Sounds*, which occasioned Confusion; but is, as every Letter ought to be, confined to one" (Franklin 1779: 469). (ii) Each sound should always be represented

[2] We qualify this statement with the modifier "in the West" because of the highly advanced science of grammar developed in the Indian tradition, as evident in the formulations of Sanskrit grammar by Pāṇinī (c. fifth century BC). See below for an interesting parallel with Pāṇinīan grammar.

by the same letter(s): "The same is to be observed in *all* the Letters, Vowels, and Consonants, that wherever they are met with, or in whatever Company, their Sound is always the same" (ibid.).[3] (iii) No letters should be unpronounced: "It is also intended that there be *no superfluous* Letters used in spelling; i.e. no Letter that is not sounded" (ibid.). (iv) All distinct sounds should be represented: "And this Alphabet, by six new Letters, provides that there be no distinct Sounds in the Language *without Letters* to express them" (ibid.). An excerpt of the published version of these remarks is shown in Figure 1.

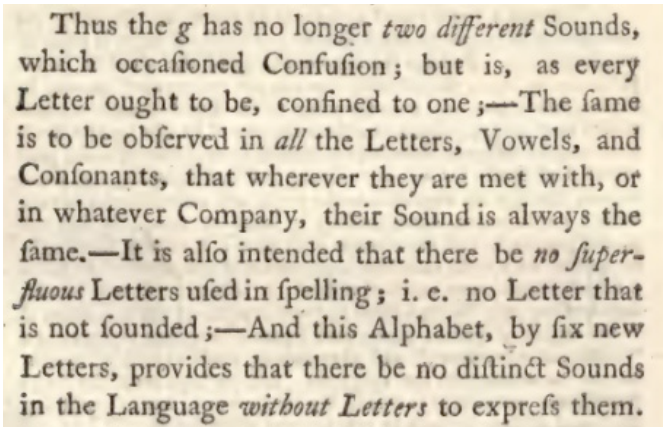

Thus the *g* has no longer *two different* Sounds, which occaſioned Confuſion; but is, as every Letter ought to be, confined to one;—The ſame is to be obſerved in *all* the Letters, Vowels, and Conſonants, that wherever they are met with, or in whatever Company, their Sound is always the ſame.—It is alſo intended that there be *no ſuperfluous* Letters uſed in ſpelling; i. e. no Letter that is not ſounded;—And this Alphabet, by ſix new Letters, provides that there be no diſtinct Sounds in the Language *without Letters* to expreſs them.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Franklin's (1779: 469) discussion of his reformed spelling schema[4]

But the specific insights Franklin has into the sounds of language and their organization are noteworthy. He introduces his remarks on the proposed alphabet by noting that "[i]t is endeavoured to give the Alphabet a *more natural* Order" (p. 468), and he defines this "natural order" on an articulatory basis. He begins with vowels and /h/, which he describes as "the simple Sounds formed by the Breath, with none or very little help of Tongue, Teeth, and Lips; and produced chiefly in the Windpipe" (p. 468). While modern linguists would not agree that vowels are formed with "very little help" of the tongue and lips, this description is in accordance with a contrast between sounds made with and without airflow constriction in the oral cavity. Additionally, his inclusion of /h/ with vowels is in line with analyses of English /h/ as a semivowel (see Castelo 1964 for an overview), particularly in light of his treatment of the vowel-semivowel pairs /i, j/ and /u, w/, discussed below.

After the vowels, he continues his articulatory exploration and the order of his alphabet by moving "forward" from the windpipe, "to those, formed by the Root of the Tongue next to the Windpipe" (velar stops /k, g/), and then "more forward" to those made "by the forepart of the Tongue against the Roof of the Mouth)" (alveolars /r, n, t, d/). He has a separate category for dentals /l, s, z/, described as "formed still more forward in the Mouth, by the Tip of the Tongue applied first to the Roots of the upper Teeth", but he still distinguishes them from the interdentals /θ, ð/, "formed by the Tip of the Tongue applied to the Ends or Edges of the upper Teeth". He concludes with the labiodentals /f, v/, formed by "the under Lip applied to the upper Teeth"; the bilabial stops /p, b/, formed "by the upper and under Lip opening to let out the sounding Breath"; and finally the bilabial nasal /m/, "ending with the shutting up of the Mouth". (See Figure 2 for

[3] Though it is interesting to note that he retained the distinction between the "long s" <ſ> and the <s> that appears only in final position. Presumably he considered these to be two versions of the same character, rather than two separate characters. See also §4.1 below regarding his views on these characters.

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, figures are screenshots from the scanned version of Franklin 1779 hosted by the Internet Archive at https://archive.org/details/politicalmiscell00franrich/.

an excerpt of these remarks.) While the IPA could be viewed as presenting the sounds in the reverse order, starting from the lips and moving to the back of the oral cavity, the overall principle is clearly the same. It is also interesting to note that the order Franklin follows, from vowels to consonants, with consonants beginning at the back of the mouth and moving forward, is the same as that put forward by the Sanskrit grammarians such as Pāṇinī more than two thousand years prior.[5]

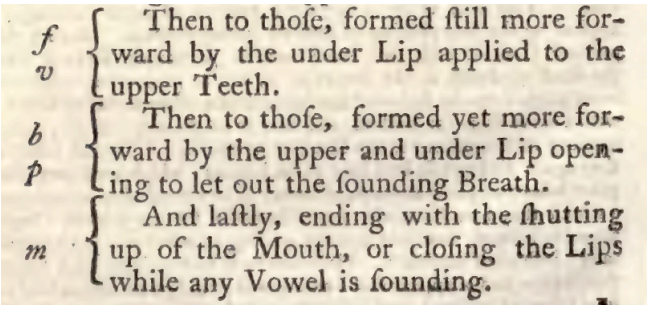

f v Then to thoſe, formed ſtill more forward by the under Lip applied to the upper Teeth.
b p Then to thoſe, formed yet more forward by the upper and under Lip opening to let out the ſounding Breath.
m And laſtly, ending with the ſhutting up of the Mouth, or cloſing the Lips while any Vowel is ſounding.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Franklin's (1779: 468) remarks on his alphabetical table

The specific changes Franklin proposed to the alphabet in order to align it with his four principles are as follows. First, he eliminated six unnecessary letters: <c, j, q, w, x, y>, all of which for fairly obvious reasons, and introduced six new letters, which are given in Table 1, along with images of the characters he developed for them and modern, computer-friendly adaptations used to represent those characters in the discussion here, IPA representations of the intended sounds, and the example words given for each new character by Franklin.

Character	Adaptation	IPA	His examples
	<ɷ>	/ɔ, (ɒ)/	John, folly; awl, ball
	<ɥ>	/ʌ, ə/	umbrage, unto; as in *er*
	<ɦ>	/ʃ/[6]	ship, wish
	<ŋ>	/ŋ/	ing, repeating, among
	<ɧ>	/θ/	think
	<ʄ>	/ð/	thy

Table 1. New characters in Franklin's reformed alphabet

Franklin's treatment of the postalveolars /ʃ, ʒ, ʧ, ʤ/ is particularly interesting and insightful. He recognizes that all four are linked by a common element of sorts, which could be loosely described as palatal frication, and he represents this with his new letter <ɦ> "ish". While he uses this character to represent /ʃ/ when on its own, he combines it with other characters that give additional specifications for voicing and manner of articulation to represent the other postalveolars: the voiced fricative <zɦ> /ʒ/ and the voiceless and voiced affricates <tɦ> /ʧ/ and <dɦ> /ʤ/.

Franklin also recognized the connection between the high vowels and their semivowel/glide counterparts, choosing to use the vowel characters <i> and <u> for /i, j/ and /u, w/, respectively, including in their use as off-glides in diphthongs, as in <ɷu> /aʊ/ and <ɷi> /ɔɪ/ (note also the use

[5] We have been unable to find any evidence that Franklin was exposed to or had any knowledge of Sanskrit, so while this possibility cannot be ruled out entirely, it seems quite unlikely at the time.
[6] And "palatalization" more generally; see below.

of the low back vowel <ɷ> /ɔ, ɑ, (ɒ)/ in these diphthongs, in contrast with <a>, which he uses to represent the front /a, æ/).

Another important innovation in his alphabet is the recognition of the need to represent a mid central vowel (/ʌ, ə/), for which he uses the symbol <ɥ>. He identifies the "short u" sound of ***u**mbrage* and ***u**nto* as necessitating such a character, as well the vowel in *er* sequences. Interestingly, he also uses this symbol for the first vowel of the diphthong standardly now given as /aɪ/, rendering it consistently as <ɥi>, which would seem to indicate a pronunciation as /ʌɪ, əɪ/.

Finally, Franklin's discussion and representation of "short and long Vowels" are noteworthy, the distinction between which he says is "naturally expressed by a single Vowel where short, a double one where long". The length distinction he describes is that associated with lax vs. tense (or (now) diphthongal) vowels; he gives the examples of <mend> for *m**e**nd* (i.e. <e> = /ɛ/) vs. <remeen'd> for *rem**ai**ned* (i.e. <ee> = /e(ː), (eɪ)/), and <did> for *d**i**d* (i.e. <i> = /ɪ/) vs. <diid> for *d**ee**d* (i.e. <ii> /i(ː)/). Note, however, that in his second letter written in the script he mostly changed to using <ê> for [e(ː)]; he also does not seem to have a similar distinction for /ʊ/ vs. /u/, using <u> for both, along with for /w/ (e.g. <gud> *good*, <tru> *true*, <uuld> *would*).[7]

3.2. FRANKLIN'S DESCRIPTION OF THE SOUNDS. As seen above, Franklin refers to the position of the tongue and lips in particular in his ordering of the consonants in his alphabet, and he also uses these articulators to describe the "*Manner of pronouncing* the Sounds" in his table (given as an unnumbered chart between pages 470 and 471 in the 1779 publication).

While his focus for consonants clearly was on their place of articulation, his comments also refer to qualities that seem to be associated with voicing distinctions, referring to the voiced sounds as "denser", "duller", or "fuller" than their "more acute" and "thinner" voiceless counterparts, as summarized in 1.

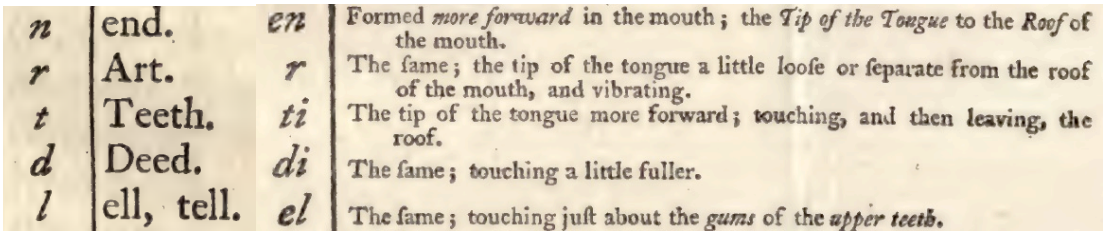
(1) Descriptions of voiced vs. voiceless consonants
   a. Stops
      - /g/ "hard *g*" vs. "a little more acute" /k/
      - /d/ "touching a little fuller" than /t/
      - /b/ vs. the "thinner sound" /p/
   b. Fricatives
      - /z/ "a little denser and duller" than /s/
      - /ð/ "a little fuller" than /θ/
      - /v/ "fuller and duller" than /f/

With regard to manner of articulation, descriptions are minimal, but he does include a few comments that address this aspect of consonant articulation. For example, he refers to stops as "touching" between the articulators in some places, as follows.

(2) Descriptions of stop manner of articulation
   - /t, d/: "the tip of the tongue more forward [than for r]; touching, and then leaving, the roof"
   - /p, b/: "the *lips full together*, and *opened* as the air puffes out"

[7] See Burgos 2018 for more on the phonetics of Franklin's schema and what it may reveal about the pronunciation of Colonial American English.

The liquid /l/, however, is not described in a way that allows it to be easily distinguished from [d]: "The same [as <d>]; touching just about the *gums* of the *upper teeth*" (see excerpt in Figure 3). Similarly, descriptions of nasals focus mostly on the place of articulation, though that for /m/ does come with the specific note that it is made with the "shutting up of the Mouth, or closing the Lips, while any Vowel is sounding" (p. 468; perhaps the visual cue to the oral closure during the pronunciation of this sound made the "vowel sound" more salient than for the other nasals).



n	end.	*en*	Formed *more forward* in the mouth; the *Tip of the Tongue* to the *Roof* of the mouth.
r	Art.	*r*	The ſame; the tip of the tongue a little looſe or ſeparate from the roof of the mouth, and vibrating.
t	Teeth.	*ti*	The tip of the tongue more forward; touching, and then leaving, the roof.
d	Deed.	*di*	The ſame; touching a little fuller.
l	ell, tell.	*el*	The ſame; touching juſt about the *gums* of the *upper teeth*.

Figure 3. Excerpt from Franklin's (1779) descriptions of the sounds represented by letters

Franklin generally describes the fricatives with reference to air "puffing between" the articulators, as seen in 3.

(3) Descriptions of fricative manner of articulation
- /s, z/: formed "by the breath puffing *between* the moist end of the *tongue* and the *upper teeth*"
- /θ, ð/: formed with "[t]he tongue under, and a little *behind*, the upper teeth; touching them, but so as to let the breath pass between"

The description of the sound of <r> clearly identifies the pronunciation of the rhotic as a trill in Franklin's speech; he describes this sound's formation as "the tip of the tongue a little loose or separate from the roof of the mouth, and vibrating".

Franklin's descriptions of the vowel sounds are more minimal than those given for the consonants, but he does provide a few interesting bits of information with regard to the quality and articulation of these sounds. He begins his listing of the vowels with <o> /o/, describing it as "[t]he first VOWEL naturally, and deepest sound; requires only to open the mouth, and breathe through it". This is contrasted with the low vowels: his <ω> /ɔ, ɑ, ɒ/, which requires "the mouth opened a little, or hollower", and <a> /a, æ/ "a little more". The mid and high vowels begin with <e> /ɛ, e(ː)/, which "requires the *Tongue* to be a little more elevated", with <i> /ɪ, i(ː)/ described as "still more". These then contrast with <u> /ʊ, u(ː)/, which requires "the *Lips* to be gathered up, leaving a small opening". His innovated mid central vowel <ɥ> /ʌ, ə/ is described as "very short", as in the pronunciation of "our present Letters" *uh*, and consisting of "a short, and not very strong *Aspiration*", which he contrasts with <h> /h/, "[a] stronger or more forcible aspiration".

While from the modern linguist's perspective much is missing from Franklin's "Scheme for a new Alphabet and reformed mode of Spelling", it shows the application of his keen powers of observation and analysis to the production of speech. Applying to English sounds and their representations the same scientific approach used in his other intellectual endeavors enabled him to see relationships between sounds and gave him insight into the component parts of complex sounds. Like grammarians/linguists thousands of years before and hundreds of years after his time have also done, he developed on the basis of these observations a more practical organizational schema for the written representation of his language.

3.3. FRANKLIN'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH MARY STEVENSON. In addition to the alphabet schema itself, correspondence between Franklin and his friend Mary "Polly" Stevenson that accompanied his schema sheds some additional light on both the use of Franklin's alphabet and his ideas about language and writing. The version of Franklin's schema published in 1779 includes the alphabet table and his remarks thereon discussed above, along with two examples of short texts (excerpts from poems by Joseph Addison) that he transcribed in the new schema and sent to Stevenson and two letters also written in the schema: a letter in response from Stevenson, and Franklin's longer letter in reply.

However, the packet Franklin originally sent to Stevenson with the reformed schema included some additional examples of the orthography in use,[8] including a word list (not retained) and an introductory letter from Franklin, dated July 20, 1768, a portion of which is seen in Figure 4. In this letter, written in the new schema, he asks her to "consider this Alphabet" and to give him "Instances of such English Words and Sounds as you may think can not perfectly be expressed by it", saying that he is "persuaded it may be completed by your help". While he acknowledges that bringing it into use will be difficult, he fears that "if Amendments are never attempted and things continue to grow worse and worse they must come to be in a wretched Condition at last", such that "our words will gradually cease to express Sounds, they will only stand for things".

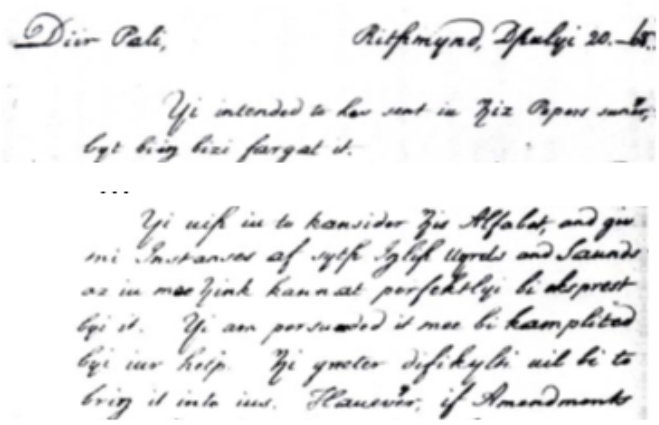
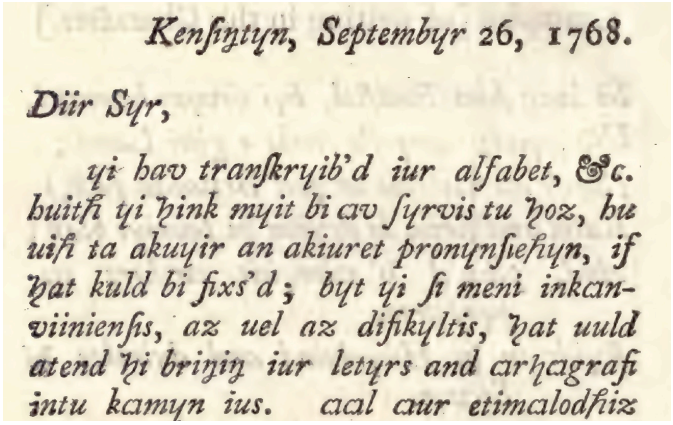


Figure 4. Portions of Franklin's letter to Stevenson introducing his schema (from Twilley 2006)

Stevenson responded to Franklin in a short letter dated September 26, 1768, written in and commenting on the new orthography (though she does not provide him with the requested notes about words or sounds that could not be expressed using it); see excerpt in Figure 5. She starts positively, noting that it "might be of service to those, who wish to acquire an accurate pronunciation, if that could be fixed" (Franklin 1779: 472). However, she expresses several concerns or, as she terms it, "many inconveniences, as well as difficulties, that would attend the bringing your letters and orthography into common use". She notes four areas of concern, all of which echo themes common to discussions of English spelling reform: the loss of etymologies, a subsequent loss of the ability to "ascertain the meaning of many words", the loss of the distinction between

[8] See "From Benjamin Franklin to Mary Stevenson, 20 July 1768: phonetic spelling and transcription," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-15-02-0095. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* vol. 15, *January 1 through December 31, 1768*, ed. William B. Willcox. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972, pp. 173–175.]. See also https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-15-02-0095.

homophones or “words of different meaning and similar sound”, and “all the books already written would be useless unless we living writers publish new editions”. She concludes that people should be allowed to spell as they are used to and comfortable with.



Kenſiŋtyn, Septembyr 26, 1768.

Diir Syr,

yi hav tranſkryib'd iur alfabet, &c. huitſi yi ȝink myit bi av ſyrvis tu ȝoz, hu uiſi ta akuyir an akiuret pronynſieſiyn, if ȝat kuld bi fixs'd; byt yi ſi meni inkanviinienſis, az uel az difikyltis, ȝat uuld atend ȝi briŋiŋ iur letyrs and arȝagrafi intu kamyn ius. aal aur etimalodſiiz

Figure 5. Excerpt of Stevenson’s letter to Franklin from (as published in Franklin 1779: 472)

Franklin replied to her with a longer letter, dated just two days later (September 28, 1768), also written in his reformed alphabet, in which he addresses her concerns in turn. He first notes that all reformations, “whether in religion, government, laws, and even down as low as roads and wheel carriages”, are “attended with inconveniences and difficulties” (Franklin 1779: 473). Thus, while this concern is natural, he frames the “true question” as “whether the conveniences will not, on the whole, be greater than the inconveniences” (ibid.); he believes the difficulties associated with this reformation would be short-lived, but that the advantages would be “lasting”. As to why implementing the reformed schema would not cause long-term difficulty, he claims first that the new schema could be learned in a week by those who already know how to spell well. For others, he expresses confidence that teaching people how to write and spell in the new alphabet would be “by far” less difficult than teaching them in the current English system. The “bad spelling” found among many presently, he says, is bad only because it is “contrary to the present bad rules”, while “under the new rules it would be good” (p. 474). As it currently stands, “[t]he difficulty of learning to spell well in the old way is so great that few attain it”, and for foreigners in particular “it makes the learning to pronounce our language, as written in our books, almost impossible” (ibid.). He also expresses awareness of language change as a regular part of life, noting that the difficulties just described are “continually increasing, as the sound gradually varies more and more from the spelling” (ibid.).

Franklin next turns to the concerns about the loss of etymologies and access to meanings, noting that etymologies would not be entirely lost since “the old books would still preserve them and etymologists would there find them” (p. 475). More importantly, he points out that etymologies are “very uncertain” and that the connection to meaning is not as strong as perhaps she believed. Just as words change their spelling and pronunciation, they also change their meanings, and thus “we do not look to etymology for their present meanings” (ibid.). He backs up this point with a practical example, noting that if he were to “call a man a *Knave* and a *Villain* he would hardly be satisfied with my telling him that one of the words originally signified only a lad or servant, and the other an under plowman or the inhabitant of a village” (pp. 475–476). His final

thoughts on this matter echo what is found in many a modern introductory linguistics textbook: "It is from present usage only the meaning of words is to be determined" (p. 476).[9]

He turns next to the problem of homophony, that is, the loss of distinctions between words of similar sound but different meanings that in the current system are separated by their spelling but would not be in the reformed system. In addressing this point, he turns his attention to the relationship between written and spoken language, highlighting what is already true of our processing of language in its most common form, that is, in speech. From this perspective, homophony is an artificial problem, since the spelling distinction "is already destroyed in pronouncing" homophonous words, and "we rely on the sense alone of the sentence to ascertain which of the several words similar in sound we intend" (p. 476). He emphasizes that this should be even less of a problem for reading than for speech, since writing "may be read leisurely; and attended to more particularly in case of difficulty, than we can attend to a past sentence, while a speaker is hurrying us along with new ones".[10]

Finally, Franklin turns to the problem of loss of access to earlier texts**,** arguing that people "like us" will still know how to read the current spelling system and that "people will continue learning both systems for a while" (p. 477). He provides an illustration from other languages with which he was familiar: the relationship between Latin and Italian. He notes that for the modern speaker of Italian, "if the spelling had never been changed" from that of Latin, it would now be "much more difficult to read and write his own language": in fact, the "written words would have had no relation to sounds [but] would only have stood for things" (ibid.). He argues that leaving the English spelling system unmodified would result in English writing becoming "the same with the Chinese as to the difficulty of learning and using it", pointing out also that we had not continued the "Saxon spelling and writing used by our forefathers" (p. 478).

There is no record of any further correspondence between Franklin and Stevenson on this topic, or of Franklin's engaging with it in any other capacity for many years, other than creating the type necessary for publishing the correspondence in 1779. However, Franklin's schema and his thoughts surrounding it were revived years later in Noah Webster's 1789 *Dissertations on the English language*.

3.4. FRANKLIN AND NOAH WEBSTER. Franklin met Webster in February 1786, when Webster came to Philadelphia to give one of his "Lectures on the English Language" (Twilley 2006, Matos 2021). On realizing their common interest in language and spelling reform, Franklin shared his schema and materials with Webster, including the types he had made of his new characters (Twilley 2006), and they struck up a relationship and correspondence. Webster's letter to Franklin of May 24, 1786, makes clear the influence that Franklin's ideas had on Webster's views about, and work toward, spelling reform:

> When I was in Philadelphia, I had the honor of hearing your Excellency's opinion upon the idea of reforming the English Alphabet. I had repeatedly revolved, in my mind, the utility of such a plan and had arranged some ideas upon the subject; but had not ventured

[9] Note the etymology of the word *etymology*, coming from Greek ἔτυμον *etymon* 'true sense of a word', from the neuter form of the adjective ἔτυμος *etymos* 'true'.

[10] Of course, written language is lacking in some contextual cues and in intonation, as well as the ability to query the speaker as to their intended meaning, points that could have been made in an extended debate on this topic. Noah Webster (see §3.4) added the following note about Stevenson's concern about homophony: "This lady overlooked the other side of the question; viz. that by a reform of the spelling, words now spelt alike and pronounced differently, would be distinguished by their letters; for the nouns *abuse* and *use* would be distinguished from the verbs, which would be spelt *abuze*, *yuze*; and so in many instances" (Webster 1789: 407).

> to hope for success in an undertaking of this kind. Your Excellency's sentiments upon the subject … have taught me to believe the Reformation of our Alphabet still practicable.[11]

While Webster ultimately decided that simpler spelling reforms were needed in order for them to be adopted by the public, he was clearly influenced by Franklin's ideas. He dedicated his 1789 *Dissertations on the English language* "To His Excellency, Benjamin Franklin", noting in the introduction that:

> I once believed that a reformation of our orthography would be unnecessary and impracticable. This opinion was hasty; being the result of a slight examination of the subject. I now believe with Dr. Franklin that such a reformation is practicable and highly *necessary*. (Webster 1789: xi).

In the appendix to this work, he provides an "essay on the necessity, advantages and practicability of reforming the mode of spelling, and of rendering the orthography of words correspondent to the pronunciation" (p. 391), in which he echoes the themes from Stevenson's and Franklin's correspondence, before reprinting (in traditional spelling) Stevenson's letter to Franklin and Franklin's response, with a few notes of his own (pp. 407–410). So while Franklin's specific foray into spelling reform is less well known by the general US public (though this may be changing, due to recent publications like Beth Anderson's 2019 children's book *An inconvenient alphabet*), his important influence on Webster lives on in the American English spellings popularized by Webster.

4. Franklin's views on language

4.1. OTHER IDEAS ABOUT LANGUAGE EXPRESSED BY FRANKLIN. Franklin's comments in his letters to Stevenson can be seen as reflecting fairly "modern" perspectives on language, such as the purpose and utility of writing systems for learners, the primacy of speech over writing, the reality and inevitability of language change, and the important role of context in the interpretation of word meaning. However, as is the case for many (present authors included!), his views on the language use of his contemporaries were not always so generous. In a December 26, 1789, letter to Webster,[12] regarding his *Dissertations* (a copy of which had been sent to him at Webster's behest[13]), Franklin says, "I cannot but applaud your zeal for preserving the purity of our language, both in its expressions and pronunciation, and in correcting the popular errors several of our States are continually falling into with respect to both". He mentions several such errors, expressing his wish that "in some future Publication of your's [sic], you would set a discountenancing Mark upon them". He would perhaps be happy to know that the first item he notes, a usage of *improved* to mean something like 'employed', which he accurately labels as "peculiar to New-England", did not spread beyond that area and likely fell out of use shortly thereafter.[14] He also voiced a familiar complaint concerning new verbs created from substantives, specifically *notice*, *advocate*, and *progress*, in addition to a change in the grammar of

[11] Correspondence between Franklin and Webster can be found at https://franklinpapers.org/framedNames.jsp?ssn=001-70-0425.
[12] https://franklinpapers.org/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=46&page=378
[13] See the Wednesday, May 20, 1789, letter from Webster to Franklin at https://franklinpapers.org/framedNames.jsp?ssn=001-70-0425: "I have at length printed my Dissertations on the Language, a copy of which I shall desire my bookseller in Phild. to deliver to your Excellency, as soon as they arrive."
[14] The last citation of this meaning of *improve* from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is from 1781; see "improve (v.2), sense 4.a", June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9655632030.

oppose, which he describes as "used in a new Manner", as in *I am opposed to* vs. *I have been opposed to* something.

As both a writer and a printer, Franklin additionally had thoughts about changes in typesetting practices, which he discusses in this letter in the context of desiring to remove difficulties that hamper the learning of English (echoing themes raised in his letter to Stevenson twenty years prior). From his perspective, the change in recent years to not using an initial capital letter for substantives, "in which we imitated our Mother Tongue, the German", makes it more difficult to read English, as it loses the distinctions between "a prodigious Number of our Words, that are both Verbs and Substantives, and spelt in the same Manner, tho' often accented differently in Pronunciation". He also notes the loss of the practice of using italics for "Words of Importance to be attended to in the Sense of the Sentence, and Words on which an Emphasis should be put in Reading" and the loss of "long *s*" <ſ> in favor of the "short round *s*" <s>: "Certainly the omitting this prominent Letter makes the Line appear more even; but renders it less immediately legible; as the paring all Men's Noses might smooth and level their Faces, but would render their Physiognomies less distinguishable". His concern also is for the benefit of those reading aloud, and along those lines he speaks approvingly of the Spanish practice of "more sensibly, plac[ing] an Interrogation at the Beginning as well as at the End of a Question", rather than the "absurd" practice of placing it only at the end of a sentence.

As noted above, a thread found in Franklin's correspondences with Stevenson and Webster about his reformed alphabet schema is the possible loss of connection between the pronunciation of English and the spelling used to represent it, "as the sound gradually varies more and more from the spelling" (Franklin 1779: 474). His references to other languages in his comments on this topic give a bit of insight into thoughts he had about language change and language relationships. The first remarks are about "Chinese", mentioned in his first letter to Stevenson accompanying the revised schema (July 20, 1768[15]). As noted above, he expresses concern that without intervention of the sort he is proposing, English writing will become like that of "Chinese" (a concern reiterated in his second letter to her on this topic; Franklin 1779: 478), but adds that:

> I suspect [Chinese] might originally have been a literal Writing like that of Europe, but through the Changes in Pronunciation brought on by the Course of Ages and through the obstinate Adherence of that People to old Customs, and among others to their old manner of Writing, the original Sounds of Letters and Words are lost, and no longer considered.

Obviously his understanding of the development of the Chinese writing system is faulty, but it follows from his general understanding of the development of languages from previous forms, leaving them no longer understandable in their written forms to speakers of the descendant languages. For English, he notes that it would "already have been" like Chinese "if we had continued the Saxon spelling and writing, used by our forefathers" (Franklin 1779: 478).

He fleshes out this idea a bit more fully with regard to the relationship between Latin and Italian, as part of his counter to Stevenson's concern that implementation of his reforms would render useless all books already written (Franklin 1779: 477):

> People would long learn to read the old writing, though they practiced the new.—And the inconvenience is not greater, than what has actually happened in a similar case, in Italy. Formerly its inhabitants all spoke and wrote Latin: as the language changed, the spelling

[15] https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-15-02-0095

> follow'd it. It is true that at present, a mere unlearn'd Italian cannot read the Latin books; though they are still read and understood by many. But, if the spelling had never been changed, he would now have found it much more difficult to read and write his own language; for written words would have had no relation to sounds, they would only have stood for things; so that if he would express in writing the idea he has, when he sounds the word *Vescovo* ['bishop', Italian], he must use the letters *Episcopus* [the Latin source of *vescovo*].

These comments indicate an understanding that gradual changes to pronunciation can result in words that sound quite different from their older forms, and that Italian and Latin, and English and Saxon, were related in this way. (However, see §4.2 below regarding some comments he made perhaps indicating a belief that Latin was descended from Greek.)[16]

4.2. FRANKLIN AND LANGUAGE LEARNING. The practical side of Franklin's interest in language also manifests itself in other ways. For one thing, he showed a great interest in language learning. He himself was a polyglot, having taught himself various major languages of Europe, in particular French, Italian, and Spanish. In doing so, he developed an interesting, and ultimately effective, way of incorporating language learning into aspects of his everyday life. He writes thus in his autobiography:

> I had begun in 1733 to study languages; I soon made myself so much a master of the French as to be able to read the books with ease. I then undertook the Italian. An acquaintance, who was also learning it, us'd often to tempt me to play chess with him. Finding this took up too much of the time I had to spare for study, I at length refus'd to play any more, unless on this condition, that the victor in every game should have a right to impose a task, either in parts of the grammar to be got by heart, or in translations, etc., which tasks the vanquish'd was to perform upon honour, before our next meeting. As we play'd pretty equally, we thus beat one another into that language. I afterwards with a little painstaking, acquir'd as much of the Spanish as to read their books also. (Franklin 1916: Ch. X)

His practical linguistic side spilled over into what we might call "crypto-comparativism" on his part. Again from his autobiography, we learn the following:

> I have already mention'd that I had only one year's instruction in a Latin school, and that when very young, after which I neglected that language entirely. But, when I had attained an acquaintance with the French, Italian, and Spanish, I was surpris'd to find, on looking over a Latin Testament, that I understood so much more of that language than I had

[16] In presentations of this paper, we have been asked about Franklin's views of German(s). This issue, which largely seems to stem from comments made by Franklin in a 1751 pamphlet and 1753 correspondence, cannot be addressed here due to limitations of time and space, and questions surround the intended recipient and original version of the 1753 letter itself (see e.g. Van Doren 1947: 31–40 and "Benjamin Franklin to Peter Collinson, 9 May 1753," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-04-02-0173. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* vol. 4, *July 1, 1750, through June 30, 1753*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 477–486]). But the matter seems to be more political and cultural than linguistic to Franklin, concerning the large and influential population of Pennsylvania Germans, and Franklin's comments (the worst of which he omitted from reprintings of the 1751 pamphlet) were publicized by his political opponents as ammunition against him. It is worth noting that Franklin published the first German-language newspaper in America, *Die Philadelphische Zeitung*, in 1732, along with other books in German. For a small sampling of research on this topic, see Aldridge 1950, Bell 1955, Frasca 1997, and Frantz 1998.

> imagined, which encouraged me to apply myself again to the study of it, and I met with more success, as those preceding languages had greatly smooth'd my way. (Franklin 1916: Ch. X)

Thus he worked from various Romance languages back to Latin (instead of the more usual direction (from Latin to Romance). In fact, he drew on this personal experience in developing a viewpoint on language-teaching methodology; again, quoting from his autobiography:

> From these circumstances, I have thought that there is some inconsistency in our common mode of teaching languages. We are told that it is proper to begin first with the Latin, and, having acquir'd that, it will be more easy to attain those modern languages which are deriv'd from it; … I would therefore offer it to the consideration of those who superintend the education of our youth, whether, since many of those who begin with the Latin quit the same after spending some years without having made any great proficiency, and what they have learnt becomes almost useless, so that their time has been lost, it would not have been better to have begun with the French, proceeding to the Italian, etc.; for, tho', after spending the same time, they should quit the study of languages and never arrive at the Latin, they would, however, have acquired another tongue or two, that, being in modern use, might be serviceable to them in common life. (Franklin 1916: Ch. X)

Moreover, he had a specific plan for the teaching of Latin and Greek, described as follows in his autobiography:

> We are told that it is proper to begin first with the Latin, and, having acquir'd that, it will be more easy to attain those modern languages which are deriv'd from it; and yet we do not begin with the Greek, in order more easily to acquire the Latin. (Franklin 1916: Ch. X)

With this statement, Franklin seemingly is buying into the position, a common belief among even the most intelligent of people, then and still today, that Latin is derived from Greek, much as the Romance languages are derived from Latin. Given the prevalence of this view and the fact that the transformative observation of Sir William Jones concerning the relation of Sanskrit to the classical languages of Europe was not announced until 1786, nor published until 1788, not long before Franklin's death in 1790, his adoption of that widely held perspective on the relation of Greek to Latin is understandable. And it is certainly true that due to their common structural character, being cut from the same Indo-European cloth, so to speak, learning Greek can indeed be helpful for understanding the structure of Latin.

5. Another dimension: Franklin and the English lexicon. While Franklin's spelling reform was not generally adopted, as clever and insightful as it may have been, he did make a lasting impression on English in other ways. In particular, he made significant contributions to the English lexicon. For instance, at least two of his inventions bear his name, the *Franklin (stove)* and the *Franklin (lightning) rod*. The former term is explained by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*; s.v.) as follows, with information as well about its attestation.

(4) *Franklin (stove)*: 'a kind of iron fireplace invented by Franklin; also, a free-standing stove for heating a room' (first attested 1787; earliest attestation just as *Franklin* in 1818 in J.

Palmer, *Journal of travels in United States of North America and lower Canada performed in the year 1817* (1818)[17]

The *OED* gives the most recent attestation as 1970, in a Canadian source. As for the latter term, the *OED* (s.v.) offers the following information.

(5) *Franklin*: 'a lightning-conductor', also *Franklin's rod* (first attested in 1818 in J. Palmer, *Journal of travels in United States of North America and lower Canada performed in the year 1817* (1818)[18]

It notes further that this usage is now to be considered obsolete, the most recent attestation being 1910, but what is important here is that its use extended well beyond Franklin's lifetime, even if it is no longer current.

Besides the names for his inventions, several technical scientific terms that Franklin either coined or else used innovatively in connection with electricity are still in common use, thus extending the meaning of existing words and giving a usage that now, more than two centuries later, is the norm; included among such words are *battery*, *charge*, *conductor*, *discharge*, *electric shock*, *electrician*, *Gulf Stream*, *minus*, *negative*, and *plus.*

Franklin's lexical contributions go beyond individual words, extending to phraseology of sorts. He popularized many proverbs and aphorisms in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, such that even if the sentiment behind the proverb was not original to him, the particular wording that he gave for the proverb has come to be the "go-to" version, as it were, highly recognizable nowadays in just that form. This is the case, for instance, with *Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise*, where in present-day English, it is enough to say simply the first few words to summon up the whole aphorism, as in *Well, as the saying goes, early to bed …* . In other cases, the popularity of *Poor Richard's Almanac* may have played a role in popularizing the proverbs, with regard to either their form or their basic intended meaning, as with the examples in 6.

(6) Proverbs and aphorisms popularized by Franklin
- *There are no gains without pains.*
- *He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.*
- *Haste makes waste.*

6. Conclusion. Benjamin Franklin is clearly one of the most accomplished of personages in the history of the United States, with contributions to knowledge and statesmanship that reverberate even into the present day. While what he did in the scientific and practical domains are justifiably most well known, those things he accomplished that pertain to the English language and to the study of language more generally are also worthy of notice. We hope by our discussion here to have shed some light on the achievements of this remarkable figure.

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[17] *OED*, "Franklin (*n.2*), sense 2.b," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2745905245.
[18] *OED*, "Franklin (*n.2*), sense 1," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3788997120.

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